

JFK probe witness not the silent type

1978, Knight-Ridder News Wire

LANCASTER, Pa. - The quiet, close-knit community of Lancaster awoke Thursday to the news that Dr. John H. Ebersole, chief of radiation therapy at Lancaster General Hospital, had broken a 15-year silence on his role in the John F. Kennedy autopsy.

"The papers got that wrong," Dr. Ebersole protested later.

"When my son Richard (a legislative aide to a Tennessee congresswoman) read it in the paper, he called from Washington and said, 'I've never known you to remain silent for 15 minutes.'"

In fact, says Dr. Ebersole, 53, he never maintained a silence on his findings as the radiologist who worked on the Bethesda Naval Hospital autopsy on the assassinated president - it's just that he was never asked.

He said he had received requests from what he termed "sensationalists" — authors and "even one pathologist" — but that he had not been involved in any official inquiries.

Now, he has been asked to appear before the House Select Committee on Assassinations and he will travel to Washington Saturday to meet with committee members.

So, he hasn't been keeping a secret, it's just that "this is the first time I've been asked by any official agency to make comment on my findings."

He says there is nothing startling in his findings — that they support the Warren Commission ruling that Kennedy was shot from behind.

"The X rays that were taken that night and interpreted by me were for one purpose and one purpose only," he said. "Prior to the start of the autopsy, because of the lack of finding of an exit wound (where the bullet or bullets left the body), it was felt that a bullet might be still in the body."

Later, we found a wound of exit in the neck that had been neatly sutured by a surgeon in Dallas. That caused some confusion early on because we thought that it was from a tracheotomy. But it was the exit wound."

On that grim November night in 1963, Dr. Ebersole, a Navy commander, had been serving as assistant chief of radiology at Bethesda for only four months.

"At the time, the chief of radiology was absent ... and I was acting chief of radiology," Dr. Ebersole said. "I was asked to assist in the autopsy in case X rays were required."

"I was present in the autopsy room from the time the casket arrived from Dallas until the autopsy was concluded, about 4 or 4:30 the next morning. Roughly 15 X rays were taken."

Dr. Ebersole, of course, could have had no idea that the X rays would be used for anything more than the location of a bullet possibly lodged in the body; that the angle and direction of the shots would much later be called into question.

Dr. Ebersole, his wife, Marian, and their six children arrived in Lancaster in the summer of 1970, shortly after he retired from the Navy and Bethesda.